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ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of credible evidence that successful efforts can be made to improve the quality of secondary education despite cutbacks in educational resources. Such efforts are demanded by the current conservative public attitude toward education, as exemplified by movements for tax and spending limitations and for the return to educational basics. This document briefly characterizes recent critical studies of secondary education that now serve as the foundation for reform efforts, and notes significant major studies currently under way. The report then classifies the findings and recommendations of these studies under three major headings: those calling for basic changes in society, those requiring fundamental structural changes in the organization and operation of secondary schools, and those suggesting changes that can be made within the present school framework. The author notes that many of these proposals are impractical, few address the political issues involved, and only rarely do they recognize the cutbacks in available funding. Before summarizing, the report lists several directions in which educational quality can be pursued without additional funding: refining educational goals, restricting efforts on low priority activities, focusing the academic curriculum, adopting direct instruction practices, and increasing student time on task. (Author/PGD)

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# IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL QUALITY IN A TIME OF DECLINING RESOURCES

An Issue Analysis Paper

Prepared for the Chief State School Officers
of the Northwest and Pacific

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# IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL QUALITY
# IN A TIME OF DECLINING RESOURCES

## Introduction

Can educational quality go up when educational resources are going down? This question is neither academic nor rhetorical; it represents a major current concern of state education agencies and of the schools these agencies serve. It is a question that must be answered, and answered positively, if American public education is to survive and prosper.

Yet the challenge posed by this question has been seen by some to be insurmountable: it's simply not possible to make the needed improvements in education--or even to maintain present quality levels--without more money. There is a growing body of credible evidence, however, that the seeming paradox--even the hopeless impossibility--of having both quality and economy presents challenges that can indeed be met. This issue analysis paper will examine some proposals that have been and are being made for the re-forming (more simply called "reform") of education which may provide a range of policy options and program directions calculated to make education more effective even in a time when educational belt-tightening has become an unavoidable necessity.

This paper will focus on secondary education for two reasons. First, the problems that bedevil contemporary public education--unacceptable levels of student achievement, lack of self-discipline and self-esteem on the part of students, disruptive behavior, and unrelatedness to the "real world"--are ones which show up most vividly at the secondary level. Furthermore, most of the proposals for educational "reforms" have, for this reason, focused on secondary education. Therefore, without in any

way suggesting that secondary education is a singularly discrete part of the entire educational enterprise, or that it is more important than elementary education, the primary focus here will be on the secondary level.

## I. The Two-Way Pressure

Educators who have responsibility for managing school systems find themselves today in an unenviable--and many would say untenable--position. Simply put, society is demanding that the schools do a better job with sharply curtailed resources. This two-way demand--improve and cut back--does not really represent a cultural schizophrenia, a confusion of goals, or a desire for going two incompatible directions at once. Rather, both of the admonitions, to do better for society but ask for less from society, are simply two facets of a single overriding mood: conservatism.

Perhaps the two-way push for quality and economy might be seen as a combination of the Proposition Thirteen syndrome and the somewhat nostalgic back-to-basics movement. But both of these societal expectations are more deeply rooted, more complex than the simple catchwords would suggest.

Economy. The reduction of funds for education does not represent merely parsimony or selfishness on the part of the supporting society, though stinginess and self-interest surely play a part. Because of a weak and faltering economy, the money we've been accustomed to having just isn't there. With some notable exceptions, neither federal nor state resources are available to support education-as-usual, and tax caps and spending limitations have severely curtailed the availability of local funds for all sorts of worthwhile services. Declining school

enrollments, and the forecasts of still further declines, do not present a demographic prospect that encourages sustained educational expenditures. Educators may well maintain that there is plenty of money--it's just being spent for the wrong things. Maybe society's priorities have been poorly chosen, but the net result is that the money we've been used to isn't available to us.

Back-to-basics. It is easy to scorn the back-to-basics movement as merely a money-saving, nostalgic proposal for return to the good old days of the three R's and the no-frills, one-room school, but the movement--however misguided we may think some of its proponents may be--reflects a very real societal concern with some of the shortcomings of contemporary education. There is deep parental concern with the visible and uncontrovertible evidence of the schools' inability to sustain earlier student achievement levels, and their failure to reach and deal effectively with a very substantial number of students. It's not just declining SAT scores or the drug problem; the educational system, despite its monumental successes in many respects, just isn't working as well as it should.

Counterbalancing past excesses. Underlying the mood for greater economy and higher quality in education is another factor that may not be consciously recognized by many who are calling for a "reform" of education, and especially of secondary education. In addition to the reasons that are essentially conservative, the call for educational reform stems from a desire to bring about a sort of mid-course correction in the directions education has taken in the past couple of decades. Perhaps it is educators, rather than the general public, who sense most clearly that there is need to redress some of the imbalances of the

Sixties and the Seventies. For example, in the Sixties, a tremendous--perhaps excessive--expenditure of money and research effort went into trying to reform secondary education by concentrating on the structure of disciplines that were deemed essential to the secondary curriculum. Massive reforms were proposed and tried out in biology, physics, mathematics, and the social studies. In the Seventies, much of this reform effort no longer seemed relevant--and anything not "relevant" was considered by many teachers to be not worth teaching and by many students to be not worth studying. In fact, "relevance" became the touchstone by which all education content and activity were measured. In addition, the schools suffered from a sense that nothing they did made any real difference--just look at what Coleman and Jenks were telling us!

Therefore, when education today is being asked to improve quality, but do it with fewer fiscal resources (and hence with fewer people), society is not just being selfish or nostalgic or mean-spirited. The society which supports education is telling us tht it is not satisfied with the schools--that we as educators should be doing a better job.

With this viewpoint, those who plan and carry out educational policy must find themselves in at least partial agreement, though not always for all of the same reasons that the critics suggest. Because of a widespread consensus that something should be done to reform education, and especially secondary education, extensive studies have been undertaken to this end. These reform proposals will be very briefly noted below. Then, without any attempt to enumerate the specific recommendation of each of the studies or projects already completed, or to try to predict what the specific recommendation of the current reform studies may be, the findings and recommendation of the studies, taken as

a whole, will be summarized in order to see what policy options are available to education decision makers.

## II. The Roots of Current Reform Efforts

For at least three decades, American secondary education has been under scrutiny--and often under attack--by a succession of critics. The purely negative criticisms will not be noted here, for we are interested only in those critical studies which offered positive suggestion for educational reform.

Best known, perhaps, of all of the modern analyses of the shortcomings of secondary education is the work of James B. Conant. In The American High School Today (1959), followed nealy a decade later by The Comprehensive High School (1967), Conant argued persuasively and sometimes passionately that the comprehensive high school was one of the great achievements of the American educational system, but that there were serious shortcomings in the quality and rigor of the curricular and academic requirements.

The Coleman report, Youth, Transition to Adulthood (1973), though widely interpreted as saying that schools did not make much difference, actually contained many reform suggestions for secondary education, with particular emphasis on replacing the comprehensive high school with smaller, more specialized schools, with far more attention being placed on the problems of the transition of youth into the adult world of work.

Less well known than the Conant and Coleman reports, but one very influential among educators, was the 1975 policy statement of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, This We Believe: Secondary Schools in a Changing Society. The secondary principals group supported the retention of two of the most significant features of

American education: the comprehensive high school and universal compulsory education until the age of majority or the receipt of a high school diploma. In addition, however, the report urged a broadening of the curricular offerings, stiffening of the requirements for a high school diploma, and closer cooperation between the secondary schools and the community to assist the transition of youth into the adult society.

Many other studies, each containing specific suggestions and recommendation for the reform of secondary education appeared during the Seventies. Each of these was a thoughtful and thorough attempt to spur reforms in secondary education, but each ultimately has a more limited audience than the major studies noted above, and many of the reports contained suggestions involving such far-reaching restructuring of society and/or of the high school that implementation of the suggestions gained little popular, political, or fiscal support.

Significant among these studies were the following:

- The Kettering-funded National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, directed by B. Frank Brown, resulting in the publication of The Reform of Secondary Education: A Report to the Public and the Profession (1973)
- A follow-up report under the name and sponsorship, The Adolescent and Other Citizens, and Their High Schools (1975)
- A US Office of Education report summarizing a national conference on secondary education reform, New Dimensions for Educating Youth (1976)
- The summary report of the USOE group, The Education of Adolescents: The Final Report and Recommendation of the National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education (1976)
- The report of the Phi Delta Kappa Task Force on Compulsory Education and Transitions for Youth, The New Secondary Education (1976)
- A rather specialized report involving the analysis of the retrospective views of exceptional high school graduates, Perspectives on Improving Education: Project Talent's Young Adults Look Back (1978)

- The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies report, Giving Youth a Better Chance: Options for Education, Work and Service (1979)

- A summary report of the Kettering-funded National Commission on Youth, The Transition of Youth to Adulthood: A Bridge Too Long (1980)

## III. Current Major Studies

There are seven major studies on the reform of secondary education under way at the present:

- A study of the values underlying secondary education, An Education of Value, under the aegis of the National Academy of Education

- Mortimer Adler's far-reaching Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto

- The College Board Study, Project Equality

- The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development project, Redefining General Education in the American High School

- The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching attempts to "describe the conditions of secondary schooling and to propose solutions for its problems," A Study of the American High School.

- The joint study of the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the National Association of Independent Schools, A Study of High Schools, which will "prescribe secondary schooling to meet Americans' needs for the rest of the century"

- John Goodlad's five year Study of Schooling is a comprehensive study of educational settings in 38 schools.

These are the six studies reported in a recent (May 1982) issue of EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP. Apparently, however, this is just the tip of the iceberg. In a recent (July 7, 1982) article in the Wall Street Journal, Professor Chester Finn of Vanderbilt Univer[illegible] notes that "Some 30 national 'high school reform' projects are under way..." Mercifully, he does not list them!

## IV. Findings and Recommendations of the Reform Studies

The findings and recommendations of these various studies are so voluminous and so diffuse--splattered over the whole spectrum of possibilities (and even of improbabilities)--that it would be impossible to list them all. In a brief (and probably arbitrary) fashion, they may be classified under three major headings: ones that call for basic changes in society; ones that would require fundamental structural changes in the way secondary schools are organized and operated; and ones which suggest specific school improvement which could be internally implemented by a given school or school district. Here is how they might be listed under these headings:

1. BASIC CHANGES IN SOCIETY: Either central to or buried in the proposals of many of the "reformers" of American secondary education are suggestions for changes in American society which are probably not within the purview or the power of the educational system. Among these are the following:

- o A "more humane" society
- o A more democratic society
- o A more cooperative society
- o More job opportunities for youth, full or part-time
- o Earlier entry of youth into the work force
- o More community involvement in policy, decisions, governance
- o Reduced societal expectations of what the schools should try to accomplish; restricting the mission of the schools to instructing, not trying to solve broad social problems; in the words of one report, "a narrower role" for the schools
- o More involvement of high school youth in "adult situations"
- o Enactment of national youth-service legislation
- o Congressional establishment of a "sub-minimum wage" to open more jobs to high school youth

Certainly, each of the proposals has enough merit to be worthy of further consideration; some of them can be advanced or encouraged by the public school system itself; but most of them involve bringing about changes in what society believes and how it behaves, not in the way the schools operate.

2. FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN THE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION. Many of the reform proposals, while generally within the scope of what schools themselves might be able to bring about, call both for rethinking the purposes of education and for making some rather drastic changes in how the educational system at the secondary level is operated. Some of the more important suggestions are these:

- o Replacing the comprehensive high school with an array of specialized secondary schools ("alternative"; "transitional")
- o Sharply reducing the size of the typical high school
- o Abolition of compulsory education beyond the 8th grade or age 14, while keeping 14 years of schooling available to all
- o Institution of the voucher system
- o Requiring absolutely the same curriculum for all (Adler)
- o Restricting high school classroom attendance to one-half day, with the other half-day spent in work-credit programs
- o Offering a broader, rather than a reduced, spectrum of available courses
- o Requiring a "personalized education program" for every student, grades 1-12 (apparently like the IEP required for the handicapped)
- o Abolishing vocational education in high school
- o Providing "more federal funds"

Nearly all of these suggestions for secondary education reform, it will be noted, represent changes which could be brought about <u>within</u> the school system, but not necessarily <u>by</u> that system. Changes in and support by the general society would also be required.

3. INTERNAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENTS: Out of the great number of "reform" studies have emerged still another category of suggested changes--ones which could be essentially accomplished by philosophical, policy, and/or operating changes within the school system. The major ones in this category are listed below:

- o More required courses
- o More rigid or definite curricular structure
- o A more demanding curriculum
- o More demanding instruction
- o More use of parent/public committees
- o More specific statements of educational goals and expectations
- o Better use of media and instructional technology
- o More/better guidance services
- o Emphasis on the principal as the instructional leader
- o More stringent requirements for receiving the high school diploma
- o Better articulation between the high school and post-secondary institutions
- o More emphasis on some specific curricular area, such as foreign languages, math and science, global education, the arts, and "values"

Most of these suggested changes are well within the province and the power of the secondary school to accomplish, given the necessary support from from within the school and from the society without.

Summarizing the Proposed Changes: Because so many different agencies, commissions, associations, and individuals have been the sponsors or participants in the numerous reform studies, it is not surprising that the suggestions, taken as a whole, reflect many ambivalences and embody many contradictory and conflicting proposals.

Without attempting to judge the merit of any of the suggested reforms, one can nevertheless make some general observations about the entire body of proposals.

From the standpoint of educational decision makers, particularly at the state level, the entire range of suggested reforms seems to have certain characteristics which would make it relatively difficult to put the proposals into practice in a time when resources are scarce and even diminishing. It is perhaps not unduly critical to make some comments about the usefulness of these reform proposals for those who must establish policy and operating procedure for American secondary education today:

1. Many of the reform proposals seem to have been made without any conscious regard for their administrative and practical feasibility.

2. Scarcely any of the proposals seem to have addressed the political issues involved: Who gains? Who loses? How will the necessary reallocations of power and money be brought about without seriously alienating specific populations and special interest groups?

3. Almost nowhere in all of the studies completed so far, or in the available prospectuses of those just now being undertaken, does there seem to be much realization that we have already gone through the happy (?) days when we could expect that money would be one of the lesser of our worries--when a good idea was rather easily fundable from some benevolent source, private foundation or federal subsidy or whatever, and when state legislatures could be persuaded to dip into a comfortable state surplus to fund some promising practice on at least a pilot basis. The funds are no longer there.

So, for the educational policy-formulator and decision maker, committed to improving the quality of education, especially secondary education, in a time of declining resources, are there still some reasonable options?

Yes, the options may not be the ones we most desire; they may not all be readily available; they may not get the job done the way we would prefer--but the options (unlike the funds) are there.

## V. Toward More Effective Schooling

Dr. Ralph Tyler, perhaps the primier elder statesman of American education, has recently observed:

> During times of material affluence we become engrossed in pursuing dollars, but when dollars are not available we seek, if we are wise, to raise the quality of education and attack some of the serious problems we face.

Now that the dollars are elusive, the pursuit of quality in education need not also elude us. Solid research and successful practice both point to some very specific directions that might be taken in the pursuit of quality. These are possible directions only, not prescriptions or panaceas. In very brief fashion, some of the policy-directions are outlined below.

1. Educational goals: Both the earlier and the contemporary studies of needed educational reform, supported by recent research, emphasize the importance of the formulation of education goals that are more clearly and succinctly stated, that have greater academic focus, that are more limited, and that address local needs to be met with local resources. Effective education is a very broad and significant enterprise, with widely shared responsibilities, involving the cooperative work of many social agencies. Effective schooling is a sharply focused primary

responsibility of the schools. The public schools' educational goals need to reflect both the narrower locus and the sharper focus that acceptance of this concept entails.

2. Educational priorities. In a time of limited and shrinking resources, the schools may be forced to give up some peripheral activities in order to concentrate on more limited academic goals. These priority judgments must be bold, and it is inevitable that they will be painful; the important thing is that they be made rationally, and not emotionally, democratically and not autocratically. But something has to give!

3. A "determined" curriculum. Education reform studies in the past--and what we know so far of those currently under way--seem generally to suggest that "reform" means adding some things deemed important by the group making the recommendations. Today, however, both fiscal constraints and research findings suggest that the secondary curriculum needs a sharper focus. As the curriculum has grown pretty much by chance, it has also become somewhat chaotic. Now, researchers are using such terms as "determined," "limited," and "coherent" to describe the kind of academic focus needed to enable school improvement and effective schooling to take place. Admittedly, improving present practice lacks the excitement and challenge of adding new programs--but this does not seem the time to add anything!

4. Direct instruction. Contemporary educational research supports, as most favorable to student achievement, the establishment of these conditions:

- o An orderly classroom
- o A clear focus on academic tasks

- The teacher's active involvement with students
- An organized and structured learning situation

The above conditions have come to be subsumed under the term "direct instruction." Although the term is used somewhat differently by different writers, running through the research on direct instruction, and the writings supporting this concept, are several common threads:

- A strong academic emphasis
- Clearly stated goals
- Provision of generous time and coverage for chosen learnings
- Emphasis on eliciting <u>correct</u> responses from students
- Constant teacher monitoring and feedback
- Structured teacher-student interaction

It is interesting to note that all of these factors and practices are essentially controllable by the teacher: they do not require new programs, new organizational or administrative patterns, or new funds. But they do require changes in some conventional patterns of teacher behavior, with more emphasis on "teacher talk"; on pacing instruction in brisk manner and in small steps; on regularized, not random, classroom procedures; and on reinforcing the teacher's expectation and perceptions--that the students are capable of learning and that the teacher is capable of teaching.

Direct instruction must not become a back-to-the-basics, rap-their-knuckles approach; if it does, it becomes in the words or two of its strongest research proponents, "grim" (Rosenshine) or "undimensional" (Peterson), or, in the words of another critic, "irrelevant to some educational purposes...restrictive for some school subjects...(and) an

affront to the learning capacity of some students." So, again, it is not a panacea or prescription for education reform; it's a direction or an option well worth considering.

5. Time on task. If the options for improving the quality of education suggested in the four numbered paragraphs above are to be seriously considered, students will simply have to devote more time to actual learning. "Time-on-task," this is generally called, or "allocated time." or "engaged time," or "academic learning time." By whatever name, the researchers have generally agreed that the concept of more time devoted to teaching and learning is essential to achieving more effective schooling. If the time is properly managed, and both teacher and learner activity carefully planned, there is a "modest but persistent relationship with achievement" when more time is allocated to actual learning tasks. But just making the students work harder and longer isn't going to get the job done. Increasing allocated or engaged time is not enough unless the teacher employs methods and selects task content which result, as one researcher has put it, in "the students' working at the appropriate level of difficulty and experiencing success." So, appropriate teacher behavior is required in making effective use of time, in planning a variety of activities adapted to different groups and levels of achievement, and in giving the required psychological and emotional support to the students to keep them effectively "on task."

## VI. In Summary

This list of some possible directions for improving the quality of education (and more particularly of secondary education) has purposely been kept brief. Consideration of the suggestions given will quickly

lead anyone concerned with policy development and educational leadership to think of others. As these options are considered and others are devised, certain criteria for making choices about where to start the improvement process, and certain conditions favorable to making the improvement an actuality become important. Just a few examples of the criteria and conditions may be useful.

Criteria. Some of the bases used for selecting among possible options for school improvement programs may be these:

- Low or no additional cost
- Reasonably amenable to change ("alterable variables," Michael Kirst has called them)
- Capable of yielding quick and visible results
- Within the money/manpower resources of state and local education authorities (without depending on federal resources)

Conditions. Educational improvements needed today may have greater chances of success if primacy is given to such program elements as these:

- Staff development to strengthen the crucial instructional processes
- Leadership development programs for the building principal as the primary instructional leader
- Strong parent and community involvement in specifying school goals and society's expectations
- Carefully-thought-out use of computers and other electronic learning technologies

Choosing and implementing school improvement programs when funds are severely limited is no easy task. But along with the problems are great possibilities, too, as the experience of many states will attest. For examples, just look around at what is already working in your own state or in other states. There are as many approaches to the improvement of educational quality in a time of fiscal retrenchment as there are

imaginative state education agencies--and there are lots of these, despite what some of the perennial critics may contend.

In the Northwest Region alone, every state is doing something constructive. Perhaps farthest along at the moment, but certainly not the only efforts, are two regional examples which come readily to mind: the Alaska Effective Schools Project and the recently completed report of the Idaho Commission on Excellence in Education. Other states are approaching the problem of combining quality and economy in markedly different ways. As almost random examples, the West Virginia SEA is using the route of instituting more demanding county-wide accreditation standards; the Ohio SEA has succeeded in enlisting the state's higher education institutions in enunciating clearer and more stringent specifications of what constitutes an acceptable college preparatory program at the secondary level; and the Alabama SEA is using the current concern about the costs and quality of education to give more vigor and prominence to their business-industry-education councils.

It is clear from the examples cited that the SEA can be central to the school improvement process. Although actual changes that make a difference have their primary effect at the classroom level (or the school site or district level), the stimulus can and often does come from the state level, as the SEA plays its sometimes limited but always crucial role as a champion of educational reform.

Fortunately, those responsible for the oversight and general welfare of entire state educational systems--Chief State School Officers and their staffs, working in conjunction with local school superintendents and boards--may well find this an unusually favorable time to spur educational reform and to work for improved educational quality. If the

central thrust of "reform" today relies no longer on the funded project, on generous governmental support, or on widespread public approbation of the schools, but instead must contend with a conservative outlook, both in fiscal support and value judgments, this just might be the time to make some necessary changes without getting clobbered.

Given the fiscal and social conservatism of today's society, what better time than this to choose to emphasize some directions toward the improvement of educational quality which would involve one or more of the following:

- o Plain-spoken statements of education's goals
- o Sharp definition of education's priorities
- o A coherent and cohesive secondary curriculum
- o A learning-centered classroom
- o More time devoted to successful learning

The plan for enlisting the needed public support would not, we may presume, be a thundering call for tightening up and cracking down. Rather, practically and politically (which perhaps mean the same thing), the call would be not for higher <u>standards</u>, but for higher <u>expectations</u>. Society believes that the schools and the students can be expected to accomplish more--and we who are professional educators accept and support that belief.